



## Local Legend Let's swim!

### Local Legends Katy Basile & Mike Fero: Water, Work, and Life In Motion

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#### Scary Zinc Nose

**Katy:** My memories of swimming start when I was about four. The swimming teacher had white zinc on his nose and I was really scared of him! My parents put me in a little swim team and lessons when we lived in Costa Mesa, California. But really, growing up in Southern California was about the beach. We went all the time. That's what I remember most.



In high school, I did Girls Athletic Association—GAA. I joined the swim team my first year, only to discover that other girls had been swimming year-round on club teams. I hadn't done anything like that. We only swam 25-yard races, and they put me in butterfly because nobody else wanted to do it. The problem was—I didn't know how to swim butterfly!

I wasn't particularly athletic. I just grew up around water, and my parents made sure I knew how to swim. Our pool at Laguna Beach High was shallow—really shallow—and only 25 yards long. I still don't know how the boys played water polo in it.

**Mike:** Yep, Laguna Beach High School pool was notoriously shallow.

#### Ice Skating and Surfing



**Mike:** For the first 13 years of my life, I lived in the South Bay, in Southern Los Angeles. My mother was a skater and a ballet teacher, and she had this vision: four Olympic ice skaters—her four kids. So that's what we did.

But we also learned to swim, mostly because we lived near the beach. Eventually, I got pulled into surf culture. By the time I was going into ninth grade, I bought my first surfboard and that was it. Game over. I was way more interested in surfing than skating.

I also joined the cross-country team and became a runner. I ran in high school and a bit in college—5K and 10K were my best events. I ran at UC Irvine alongside Steve Scott, who was basically the fastest miler in America for a decade. That's when I realized I wasn't at that level.

So I pivoted. I got into triathlons during my sophomore year of college, when the sport was just starting. I liked the water, and as a surfer I could swim—but swimming a full mile? That was a different story.

Photo caption: Mike running in high school (University High School, Irvine CA) - cross country season Fall 1975, Mike's sr year. We both graduated high school in 1976.

## **Before Running Got High Tech**



**Katy:** When I met Mike, I was a senior in college, and he was this really, really cute runner. He took me out for a run up a hill. About three-quarters of the way up, I remember thinking, *I wonder what it's like when you throw up for the first time? What if you throw up in front of your crush?* I must have looked terrible because he turned around and said, "Maybe we should walk for a while."

**Mike:** You had the dry heaves!

**Katy:** I had never run before. I wasn't an athlete at all. I took GAA in high school just to get enough PE credits to graduate.

**Mike:** Running was already a big thing by then. This was the tail end of the running boom that had swept through the country in the 1970s.

Frank Shorter had won Olympic gold in the marathon in 1972, and suddenly everybody was running. There were road races popping up everywhere, people jogging through neighborhoods, and entire magazines devoted to training. Nike was becoming a household name. Bill Bowerman had famously poured rubber into his wife's waffle iron to create the first waffle-soled running shoe, and every serious runner wanted a pair. There was a whole culture around it—short shorts, tube socks, stopwatches, training logs, and endless conversations about mileage and race times. Running felt new and exciting, like you were part of something that was growing every year.

Then Katy shows up wearing her high school PE shorts—those cotton button-up-the-side shorts that looked like they came from another era entirely. I'd never seen anything like it. Here I was, surrounded by runners in nylon split shorts and running shoes, and she was out there in these old-school PE clothes, trying to run up a hill. I felt so bad for her. At the same time, there was something kind of endearing about it. She had absolutely no idea what she was getting herself into.

**Katy:** That was in the fall of 1979. By March 1980, I ran my first 10K. So—I became a runner!

*Photo caption:* Bolle Challenge - swimming/running along the coast; surfski; biking. Circa 1983-1984

## Baryon/Quark Hunting



**Katy:** We both dabbled in masters swimming at UC Irvine before heading to Switzerland in the early '80s, when Mike was doing graduate research at CERN. I took a year off from law school and worked odd jobs at a law firm—they liked having an English-speaking American around. We didn't swim much there. We ran—a lot. The Alps are incredible for running.

**Mike:** We were definitely more runners than swimmers then.

*Photo caption:* Katy running the Greifensee Lauf in Switzerland in 1984. We were in Switzerland/France from June 1984 to September 1985, during which Mike did his PhD research at CERN.

*Editor's Note: CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) is one of the world's largest and most respected centers for scientific research, known for housing the largest particle physics laboratory, located on the Franco-Swiss border near Geneva. It uses massive, underground accelerators, primarily the Large Hadron Collider, to smash particles together and study the fundamental structure of the universe.*

## Mike's Always Looking Out for Me



**Katy:** I didn't really return to Masters swimming until after we had our fourth child in 1998. By then we were living in Menlo Park. Mike came home one day and said, "I think you'd really like this coach and this team." That was Menlo Masters. I joined in December 1998, and I've been there ever since.

**Mike:** She joined first. I was swimming at Ladera Oaks at the time. Katy had such a positive experience that I followed about six months later.

**Katy:** I switched from running to swimming. My body eventually gave out on running.

**Mike:** Same for me. Swimming is just easier on the body over time.

*Photo caption:* Party celebrating when we married (we eloped to Santa Ana city hall and had a party in grad student housing rec room (1983).

## The Butterfly Problem

**Katy:** One of my defining swimming moments was when Tim told me gently, "You won't get disqualified in a butterfly race—but you stop-start-stop-start all the way down the pool."

My competitive swimming has been with Menlo Masters. I recall meets at the beautiful pool at UC Santa Cruz, my first jar of jam for my first meet (thank you, Rebecca Pinto). Since then, I have gone

to Masters Nationals (very intense); many Pacific Masters championship meets; Senior Game swim meets; and local fun swim meets. I learned to swim the butterfly when my youngest was about 5 years old (he is 27 now), with the goal of swimming the 200 fly – which I did at the FINA Masters Worlds at Stanford in 2006. No one had ever really taught me how to swim butterfly. It took months to learn properly. That last 15 meters? That's always the part that nearly kills me. Now, if I get to a meet, I tend to go on Fridays and swim the 400 IM – challenging but not a full 200 fly!

**Mike:** When I'm racing in the butterfly, I always think, "This is going fine. Look how patient I am. Look how deliberate and form-focused I am." And then—it's not fine.

**Katy:** I also swam the 200 fly at Worlds at Stanford—but I got officially DQ'd for not meeting the qualifying time. Still—I finished it!

## Big Goals: Ironman and Swimming the Catalina Channel

**Mike:** I've always had a few bucket-list goals. I wanted to do an Ironman. I wanted to do a big open water swim. I did both—because of Master's swimming.



For long-distance swimming, you have to manage your mind. I use a set of drills Tim gave us: alternate breathing, focus on the front of the stroke, push through the back, then put it all together Repeat. Count strokes. Break time into chunks.

I ended up swimming the Catalina Channel. I'm a West Coast guy—I'll take that over the English Channel. It gave me a glimpse into the world of ultra-distance swimmers. Those people are... something else. It is humbling.

## Moving Beyond the Mavens Water Polo

**Katy:** These days, I swim three or four times a week and walk a few days a week. For several years, I also played masters water polo. Rebecca Pinto was the one who got me involved. She kept saying, "Come hang out after swim practice. This is really fun." Eventually, I did, and she was right.

I played with both Peninsula Water Polo and the Menlo Mavens. I first took up water polo after my oldest daughter finished her senior year of high school. I had never played before, and it was actually a good time to start because many women my age were in the same boat. They hadn't played in high school or college either. In fact, I hadn't really played team sports growing up. I did GAA in high school because you had to take four years of PE back then, not because I was particularly interested in athletics.

What I enjoyed most was learning the game. Water polo is different from swimming because every moment is changing. You always have to be looking ahead, thinking about where the ball is going next, what the other team is doing, and where you should be. There's a lot of anticipation involved, and a lot of quick decisions. I liked that aspect of it, even though I sometimes tend to overthink things.

Swimming is often a fairly individual sport, even when you're training with a group. Water polo felt different. There was a lot of camaraderie at practices, games, and tournaments. I especially enjoyed playing with younger women who had played in high school and college. They knew so much more about the game than I did, and they were always patient about helping me learn.

The timing was good, too. The local women's masters water polo community was growing around the time of the World Championships at Stanford, and there were many opportunities to play. I don't play nearly as much anymore. Between the pandemic and our grandchildren, other things have taken over some of that time. But I'm glad I did it. It was a chance to learn a completely new sport as an adult and become part of another great community.

**Mike:** My training week is somewhat inconsistent. If life is in a rhythm, I'll swim six days a week. But work still comes in waves, so I don't always get to the pool as often as I'd like.

## Pro Bono Work

**Katy:** I'm a lawyer, and a lot of what I do outside of work has involved pro bono legal assistance and volunteer work. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to work with people in a lot of different ways. Mike and I were mentors for several young people coming out of the California Department of Corrections. They were usually 18 or 19 years old and needed help with things most of us take for granted—finding housing, getting a driver's license, looking for work, and figuring out what came next. It became something of a family project for us.

I've also spent time mentoring students at Menlo-Atherton High School and working with a variety of community organizations. One thing I've always appreciated about volunteer work is that there are opportunities to help at every level. Sometimes it's a complicated legal matter that lasts for years, and sometimes it's simply helping someone solve a problem that is overwhelming to them in that moment.

My pro bono legal work has covered a wide range of issues. I've helped people through legal aid clinics, worked on asylum and Special Juvenile Immigrant Status cases, represented incarcerated individuals seeking medical care, and I'm currently involved in a capital death penalty case. The subject matter varies, but the common thread is helping people navigate systems that can be difficult to understand and even more difficult to navigate alone.

More recently, I've had the opportunity to work with fellow Menlo Masters swimmer Sarah Eisner on issues related to her family's history and efforts to seek reparative justice connected to American enslavement. That work has been particularly meaningful because it combines history, law, and the chance to help someone I know personally. Looking back, these kinds of projects have been one of the most rewarding parts of my legal career.

Another project with a legal aspect was a child's medical backpack—something a mother designed so her young son could carry infusion equipment during cancer treatment, a mom we know well: Coach Becky.

*Editor's Note: I asked Coach Becky Eastman about what she made and how Katy was instrumental in bringing her vision to others in need: "When our son, Parker, was diagnosed with leukemia, he was only 18 months old. During one phase of treatment, he had to carry a pump connected to him 24/7. Watching him try to move, play, and just be a little kid while carrying something that wasn't made for him... it broke me. There was nothing out there to help him. So I made something myself. Parker's Pak came from that place — from love, fear, and the need to give my child even a small piece of normal in the middle of something so hard. Now it's grown into a way to help other families feel a little less alone, and that means everything to me. Katy and her team have been outstanding... that was my guiding light and I would not be where I am in my business without them. They helped me get the patent, trademark the name, and with legal questions. I am forever grateful for what she and her amazing team did."*

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- Clasp for tubing:** A dedicated space to keep extra tubing secure, protected, and out of the way.
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Let's Chat!

See: [www.parkerspak.com/](http://www.parkerspak.com/)

It's been a 40-year arc of volunteer work. Not all at once—but consistently.

**Mike:** I've also mentored students—through programs connected to Stanford and beyond. We took the kids snowboarding and to football games. It was a blast.

Professionally, much of my career has focused on synthetic biology. At its core, it's about finding more sustainable ways to make the products we use every day. Instead of relying entirely on fossil fuels and petroleum, the idea is to use biology—things like microbes and natural biological processes—to produce useful chemicals, materials, and medicines.

I've always been interested in the environmental consequences of our dependence on fossil fuels, from climate change to plastic waste. What attracted me to synthetic biology was the possibility of working on alternatives. Nature has been solving these kinds of problems for a very long time, and a lot of my career has been spent exploring how we can learn from those systems and apply them in practical ways.

There's a lot of potential there—but also a lot of challenges.

## Maintaining Optionality

**Katy:** Life is like a tree. You make a decision, and you don't realize you're cutting off entire branches.

I had a chance to clerk for a California Supreme Court justice—or take a law firm job that worked better with having a newborn. I chose the firm. That decision shaped everything that followed.

No regrets. Just different paths.



Photo credit: Kyle Leimkuhler

**Mike:** I tell our kids, “Keep as many branches open as long as you can.” Instead of committing early to a single path—a “fixed” career, a rigid five-year plan, or a specific location—optionality means building a portfolio of possibilities that lets you pivot when new information emerges. It is the ability to shift direction, explore new opportunities, or step back when necessary, rather than being trapped in a single, predetermined, or path-dependent trajectory. By trying many small things (e.g., surfing, being an entrepreneur, writing, speaking) rather than one big thing, you increase your surface of exposure to positive, unpredictable events. I really believe in that.

**Katy:** Raising four children while Mike and I were both building our careers does make me reflect on the challenges our own children are facing now as they raise families and navigate their careers. Looking back, I realize how much support I had, especially from Mike and from my mom.

My mom was one of my strongest supporters throughout my life. I still remember being at a swim meet at UC Santa Cruz. I was standing on the blocks before a race, and everyone else had already dived in. My mom was in the stands, smiling—really grinning—and called out, “Honey, why are you still standing there when everyone else is jumping in?” She was always there, always encouraging me, and always able to make me laugh.

In many ways, I feel fortunate. There were plenty of times when the wheels could have come off the train while we were raising our family. There were certainly moments when I was ready to quit one thing or another—whether it was work, swimming, volunteering, or just trying to keep all the balls in the air. But for one reason or another, I kept going. And almost without exception, a few months later, I was glad I had. Looking back now, I think a lot of life is simply putting one foot in front of the other and trusting that things will look different if you give them a little time.



Photo credit: Kyle Leimkuhler

I took up Masters swimming right after Mostyn, my youngest, was born at Mike's encouragement. Mike found Tim's team, came home, and said, "I think you would enjoy this." He was right. I recall showing up to one workout in January (while we were at Sacred Heart), and the team was doing the hour swim. I had no idea what was going on. One of the swimmers, Anne (she moved several years ago to follow her grandchildren), had her husband there to count. She told me to get in with her, and her husband would count for both of us. That is the spirit of the team that welcomed me and has kept me going all of these years (and Tim's great swimming sets).

### **Masters: Our Network and Recharge**



Photo credit: Kyle Leimkuhler

**Katy:** What's amazing about Menlo Masters is the people. It's cross-generational—you're in the locker room learning things you never expected to learn, from menopause to life advice. And it's true—if something goes wrong, someone will be there. If you need community, you'll find it. If you need help or guidance, there is someone at the pool who has that experience, expertise or connection.

There are incredible role models. People in their 90s are still swimming. On my birthday, I ended up having breakfast with two swimmers in their nineties. I felt young.

I don't usually do a swim workout by myself. If I swam 500 yards alone, I'd think, *Wow, I did that.* I come for the people. The lane. The coaches.

I've done some [SwimTrek vacation trips](#) with friends from Menlo Masters. I enjoy the opportunity to swim in new environments – natural beauty, open water – and to see new places and learn more about local cultures where possible. The SwimTrek guides are often very knowledgeable, may be local, and have made the trips more enjoyable.

**Mike:** I always appreciate people in their 30s who are willing to hang out with people in their 60s. That's pretty cool.

*Editor's Notes: Frances Reneau conducted the interview with Katy and Mike. Kim edited the transcript*

## About Local Legends

Menlo Masters is gathering and sharing stories of extraordinary individuals on the team. We hope these narratives will connect us with each other and inspire us to swim often.

If you know a swimmer who has some stories, please send an email to Tasha Capen, Menlo Master Team Manager [tasha@menlomasters.com](mailto:tasha@menlomasters.com)